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UNCLAS DUSHANBE 001732

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EUR/CACEN, EUR/PPD, EUR/ACE, SA, DRL
NSC FOR MERKEL

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: FERMENT FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.
Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: While the Government of Tajikistan is loathe to license new independent media outlets, ferment is occurring. A new, independent weekly newspaper has appeared, albeit with microscopic circulation. The same company has appealed to the Ambassador to lend diplomatic support to its application to register a new FM radio station. Likewise, a Tajik NGO has appealed for help to license a new public television station. An existing Tajik public relations company, backed by wealthy Tajik businessmen in Tajikistan and Russia, has received a license to rebroadcast in Dushanbe Moscow's "Europa-Plus" radio station, and also wants to found a new television station. The Ministry of Justice, responsible for licensing, still keeps a tight grip to prevent anything "political" not approved by the inner circle of decision makers. Any truly independent, non-self-censored media will face an uphill battle. END SUMMARY

"2X2"

3. (SBU) A new weekly newspaper, "2X2," has been appearing in Dushanbe for the last six weeks - but only with 99 copies so that it remains under the legal requirement for registration. A project of the Avesta Internet Agency, which already produces reliable and independent Internet and e-mail subscription news (www.avesta.tj), "2X2" is centrist and somewhat critical of the government.

A-MEDIA

4. (SBU) Chief Editor Zafar Abdullayev is also the director of Information Agency Avesta and chairman of the Tajik NGO, Foundation in Support of Democracy "Kuhi Nor," which is an Open Society Institute project. Abdullayev was a co-founder of the independent newspaper, "Asia Plus," but broke away to found his own media outlet. A key editor for "2X2" is Zebo Tadjibaeva, also previously with "Asia Plus" as well as a media adviser for the Democratic Party of Tajikistan.

5. (SBU) Abdullayev sent the Ambassador a letter on October 18 recounting his attempts for the last six months to register a new business, A-Media, with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). A-Media would then apply separately for licenses for "2X2" and for a new independent FM radio station. MoJ has played its standard game of ignoring the application or repeatedly returning it because of "grammatical errors." Abdullayev asked the Ambassador to advocate his case with the Government of Tajikistan as part of the broader U.S. advocacy for democracy in Tajikistan.

TV MARKAZ

6. (SBU) The Director of the Tajik NGO "Fides," Maarouf Muhamedov, sent a letter to the U.S. Embassy October 24 detailing his so-far failed attempts with the MoJ to gain a license for a new public television station, TV Markaz. MoJ made clear that TV Markaz would not be registered because of "instruction from top officials not to proceed with registering media organizations." Muhamedov asked, like Abdullayev, that the U.S. Embassy, as the defender of democracy in the region, advocate with the government for free and independent media.

EUROPA-PLUS

7. (SBU) A group of wealthy Tajik businessmen in Tajikistan and Russia, headed by Nurullo Fasilov of MKR (an Internet,

advertising, and public relations firm), has received a license for a new private FM radio station in Dushanbe to rebroadcast Moscow's Europa Plus. They also hope to obtain a license for a private TV station, but no information is available on the origin of the programming. Reportedly the MoJ told Fasilov he'll get his license, "but if you broadcast anything 'political' we'll close you down."

8. (SBU) COMMENT: The intriguing factor in the Europa Plus development is that some rich businessmen in Dushanbe are not

all that satisfied with the current government but are keeping their heads down. It's conceivable that Europa Plus might be a way for them to position themselves for the future. Some of them may also be involved with TV Markaz, since Muhamedov hinted that "Fides" would be only one of the shareholders in his proposed independent TV station. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND

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